DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 232 100 CG 016 794

AUTHOR Wright, Doris J.
TITLE Self-Disclosure of Black College Students.
PUB DATE Apr 82
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Southwestern Psychological Association (28th, Dallas, TX, April 15-17, 1982). For related document, see CG 016 793.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Students; *College Students; *Counseling Techniques; *Counselor Client Relationship; Higher Education; Interpersonal Relationship; Racial Differences; *Racial Factors; *Self Disclosure (Individuals); Whites

ABSTRACT

This literature review of nine books and journal articles from 1971-1981, proposes strategies for better understanding the self-disclosure of black college students in the counseling process. The paper presents the functions of self-disclosure which may influence a person's perception of the appropriateness of the self-disclosure, including: (1) expression; (2) self-clarification; (3) social validation; (4) relationship development; and (5) social control. Social cues which characterize these functions for blacks, and which may require that a counselor accept culture-specific differences, are reviewed. Several false assumptions which a white therapist may hold regarding blacks are outlined: denial of a client's racial/cultural background; belief that a black client's problems stem from being black in an oppressive environment; and the supposition that the therapist is an expert on black culture. A discussion of strategies which may be appropriate for a white therapist to use with black clients is presented and includes: encouraging the client to disclose using Black English; revealing the parameters which exist in a therapeutic relationship; examining disclosure flexibility changes across black and white clients; learning what topics are perceived by blacks as appropriate to communicate to a white person; and recognizing that blacks are not a homogeneous group. (AG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED232100

SELF-DISCLOSURE OF BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS 1

Doris J. Wright

Counseling-Psychological Services Center

The University of Texas at Austin

1 This article is based on a paper read at the Annual Convention of the Southwestern Psychological Association, April 15-16, 1982. Requests for reprints should be directed to the author: Counseling-Psychological Services Center, P.O. Box 8119, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712.

CG 016794

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Doris J. Wright

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes strategies for better understanding self-disclosure of black clients. In particular, the suggestions are especially applicable for white therapist - black client interactions. False assumptions which a white therapist may hold are examined and suggestions for reducing them are proposed. Finally several suggestions for helping white therapists improve therapeutic relationships with black clients are proposed.

Self-Disclosure of Black College Students

Doris J. Wright

Counseling-Psychological Services Center

The University of Texas - Austin

The degree to which clients are able to discuss freely their thoughts, self-doubts, and concerns is a basic ingredient of therapy (Block, 1981). Given the importance of open expression in therapy, identifying and understanding attributes that positively impact clients is valuable information. Of those attributes which may be useful to understand in therapy, one is self-disclosure.

Understanding client disclosure has proven useful in determining a student's tendency to self-disclose (Merluzzi, Banikiotes, and Missbach, 1978). Self-disclosure research has shown why clients are resistant to change in therapy. Personal disclosures in counseling may contain material vital to learning about one's psychological well-being and inner feelings. Self-disclosure, in this context, becomes a clinical tool for effecting therapeutic change.

Self-disclosure is believed to be situation and person specific. Certain kinds of disclosure may be reserved for selected persons or unique social interactions. Identifying and understanding the variety of personological and environmental attributes that influence a person's disclosure pattern is worthy of investigation. One personological attribute which may influence a client's disclosure in therapy may be race or cultural background.

This paper examines the possible influences on self-disclosure which occur when the therapist is white and the client black. The assumption here is that sociocultural differences may exist between white and black populations in the U.S. which may in turn influence cross-racial interactions, especially personal ones. Additionally, this paper proposes strategies which may help college mental health professionals develop appropriate therapeutic interventions which promote culture-specific disclosures and subsequently, result in therapeutic changes.

Self-Disclosure Definitions

The self-disclosure literature is abundant; much of it comes from social psychology. Definitions of self-disclosure from the literature are varied. No single definition exists to explain the phenomenon.

Self-disclosure may be described as the verbal presentation of personal information to other individuals (Taylor, 1979). It represents any information exchange that refers to the self, including personal states, dispositions, events in the past, and plans for the future (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979, p.152). For a verbalization to be identified as disclosure, it must contain personal information about Person A; and Person A must verbally communicate this information directly to target Person B (Chelune, 1979, pp.2-3).

Self-disclosure is viewed as a primary factor in the development of

interpersonal intimacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega & Chaikin, 1975; Jourard, 1971b). Several researchers argue that self-disclosure is an important way for decreasing interpersonal distance between individuals. Self-disclosure, however, does not always lead to interpersonal intimacy, which is believed to be essential for an adult's growth and development. Derlega and Chaikin (cited in Chelune, Sultan, & Williams, 1980) noted that "...disclosure may serve a positive function, i.e., to improve a relationship, ...but (it) may also be inappropriate when it elicits withdrawal and rejection" (p.11).

Self-disclosure may serve different functions which may influence a person's perception of the appropriateness of the disclosure statement (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979 p.153). These functions may be grouped as follows:

(1) Expression - for example, expressing here-and-now feelings, such as hurt and rejection, after the break-up of a relationship.

(2) Self-clarification - talking about one's beliefs and opinions to clarify a position.

(3) Social Validation - eliciting feedback and validating one's self-concept.

(4) Relationship development - acting as a vehicle for developing close relationships or maintaining them.

(5) Social Control - operating as a tool for controlling or possibly exploiting others and to increase control over outcomes (p.153-154).

These disclosure functions may be culture-specifically determined. The social cues which may characterize these disclosure functions for blacks may vary from whites. Working effectively with blacks in therapy may require

that a counselor accept and accommodate culture-specific differences, especially in disclosure. Unfortunately, a therapist often may fail to recognize these differences. Instead, he/she may interact on cultural misinformation and stereotypic assumptions which can be harmful to the client in therapy.

False Assumptions Regarding Blacks

Understanding a black client's self-disclosure patterns requires that a therapist have accurate information regarding black culture. Whenever a black client is misinterpreted or misunderstood, a therapist may have employed implicit cultural or racial biases which may contribute later to misdiagnosis. Block (1981) wrote that a white therapist makes three errors in working with black clients. First, a therapist may ignore a client's blackness thus becoming "color-blind". He/she may deny a client's racial and/or cultural background (Thomas & Sillen, 1972). Second, a white therapist may believe that a black client's problems stem from the condition of being black in an oppressive environment which may have left "permanent scars" on that person's personality (Block, 1981, p. 185). This assumption may contribute to a white therapist concluding that a black client may be limited in personality functioning.

Third, a white therapist may take on a "great white father role" (Vontress, 1971). A therapist attempts to persuade the client that he/she means nothing but good for the client (Block, 1981). From this false assumption, a therapist

might recommend that a black client abandon his/her own culture-specific reality testing skills and instead, accept "advice" or suggestions from a well-meaning (but poorly informed) white therapist. This assumption supposes that the therapist is "expert" on black culture.

These false assumptions may limit a therapist's overall effectiveness with a black client by restricting one's understanding of a black client's feelings and actions. The entire therapeutic process may be threatened. Separately, each of these assumptions denies or restricts the potential advantages and psychological strengths which may be ascribed to black culture. These assumptions may be harmful to a black client working with a white therapist.

Developing adequate rapport between a white counselor and black client is crucial to therapeutic success. Also, maintaining rapport is crucial during initial therapy sessions because it may determine how a client evaluates the feasibility of continued use of service (Bell, 1979). Understanding disclosure may contribute to building rapport in therapy. For this reason, reducing negative assumptions about blacks is important to therapy.

Strategies for Enhancing Black Disclosure

Overcoming these potential cultural biases and false assumptions requires a therapist alter his/her perceptions of black people. Additionally, changes in therapeutic interventions may need to occur if a black client is to benefit fully from therapy. Several strategies may be appropriate for a therapist to employ with a black client.

First, a white therapist must encourage a black client to disclose using Black English dialects or regional language patterns. It is important for a client to know he/she can feel comfortable using a familiar language style. Second, a black client may need to know the parameters which exist in a therapeutic relationship. This information may help acquaint a client with the therapeutic process. Understanding the parameters of therapy may help a black client feel comfortable disclosing. This information may increase a black client's ownership to and responsibility for progress.

Chelune (1975) suggested that disclosure flexibility is essential for effective interpersonal functioning. Disclosure flexibility is defined as the ability to adequately differentiate situational and interpersonal cues and to adapt them accordingly (Chelune, 1975). This skill may be culture-specific; present research on disclosure flexibility and race is inconclusive. Flexibility patterns may vary more for black than for white persons. A third strategy is for a therapist to examine disclosure flexibility changes across black and white clients. Clinical information about a client's interpersonal functioning and skill deficits may be acquired which could be valuable later in therapy.

A black client's self-disclosure patterns in therapy may differ from his/her disclosure patterns with a black peer. What a black feels is appropriate to disclose to a black peer may differ significantly from what he/she would disclose to a white authority figure. A fourth strategy might

involve a therapist learning about topics perceived appropriate to communicate to a white person. A therapist may seek to learn how that presumed perception influences a black client's willingness to disclose in therapy.

Finally, the white therapist must recognize that black people are not a homogeneous group. Intragroup variations may exist among black persons which reflect regional or geographical, economic, environmental, and other black socio-cultural differences. Black clinicians and researchers continue to examine black intragroup differences. A therapist must realize that subtle intra-cultural differences in disclosure may exist too. A therapist must adjust his/her therapeutic assumptions, beliefs and behaviors accordingly.

Summary

This paper sought to discuss therapeutic strategies a white therapist might employ when seeing black clients. This discussion sought to provide clinical insights to understanding self-disclosure. Self-disclosure may be defined as the verbal presentation of aspects of self. Self-disclosure may serve several functions which may facilitate or hinder interpersonal development. It is posited that these functions and their related behaviors may vary for blacks.

Several suggestions for enhancing black self-disclosure within therapy were offered. A white therapists must re-educate oneself about black students. Part of the re-education process requires an examination of the perceptual biases and professional expectations which a therapist may have of

blacks. In addition, after understanding those variables which characterize black self-disclosure, a white therapist must create a therapeutic environment which encourages black self-disclosure. The outcome might be an environment where black clients feel comfortable discussing personal dilemmas and one where clients may learn culturally-appropriate ways of handling personal/life decisions.

References

Altman, I. & Taylor, A.D. Social Penetration: The Development of Interpersonal Relationships. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1973.

Black, C.B. Black Americans and the Cross-Cultural Counseling and Psychotherapy Experience. In A.J. Marsella and P.B. Pedersen (Eds.) Cross-Cultural Counseling and Psychotherapy. New York: Pergamon Press, 1981, 177-194.

Chelune, G.J. Self-Disclosure: An Elaboration of its Basic Dimensions. Psychological Reports, 1975a, 36, 79-85.

Chelune, G.J. Self-Disclosure. Origins, Patterns, and Implications of Openness in Interpersonal Relationships. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979.

Derlega, V.J. & Chaikin, A.L. Norms Affecting Self-Disclosure in Men and Women. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 1976, 44, 376-380.

Derlega, V.J. & Grzelak, J. Appropriateness of Self-Disclosure. In G.J. Chelune (Ed.). Self-Disclosure. Origins, Patterns, and Implications of Openness in Interpersonal Relationships. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979, 151-176.

Taylor, D.A. Motivational Bases. In G.J. Chelune (Ed.). Self-Disclosure Origins, Patterns, and Implications of Interpersonal Openness in Interpersonal Relationships. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979, 110-150.

Thomas, A. & Sillen, S. Racism and Psychiatry, New York: Brunner Mazel, 1972.

Vontress, C.E. Racial Differences: Impediments to Rapport, Journal of Counseling Psychology, 1971, 18, 7-13.